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A would-be 'cool' city proposes a reduction in recycling

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A would-be 'cool' city proposes a reduction in recycling

Budget cuts threaten a progressive program

By DANIEL STURM

Imagine being outside on your patio this summer, sipping lemonade and perhaps grilling some shish kebab. Smoke drifts over from your neighbors' yard. Perhaps they're grilling shish kebab, too? No, it's just the smell of burning compost.

If Lansing City Council approves its 2004-'05 proposed recycling budget cuts, homeowners will need to think of new ways to get rid of their grass and garden clippings this summer. The budget, which will be discussed in a series of public meetings, proposes 13 fewer weeks of curbside compost pickup, and the elimination of seven full-time recycling staff positions, including at least four drivers and the recycling coordinator.

Curbside pickup of grass, leaves and tree trimmings would halt from June 15 through Sept. 15.

The city also proposes raising the annual recycling fee from \$52.50 to \$60 this year, with an additional increase to \$62.50 in 2005.

Matt Flechter, recycling and composting coordinator for the state Department of Environmental Quality, said the move would result in an increase in the illegal disposal of yard clippings.

But an even more troubling problem, said Flechter, who also chairs the Mayor's Citizens Advisory Committee on Recycling, is the elimination of the Lansing recycling coordinator's post.

The city would no longer have a program or budget for educating residents, Flechter wrote in an e-mail: "In fact, Lansing will be doing just the opposite by cutting staff that could be educating residents about the change in service."

Kerrin O'Brien, who served on the recycling advisory committee from 1997 to 2001, said one reason she chose to stay in Lansing was the city's recycling program, which she described as second only to Ann Arbor's. "We're

providing services that help improve people's quality of life," she said.

The nonprofit consultant said that cutting the recycling budget would undermine Lansing's efforts to become a "cool city," making reference to Gov. Jennifer Granholm's revitalization effort to attract more young professionals to the state.

By emphasizing the need for budget cuts, the city runs the risk of portraying recycling as an expensive burden on the city. This would undermine a more-than-decade-long effort to promote the opposite — recycling as a way to protect the environment, promote sustainability and save money.

Established in 1990 with a \$2,282,554 grant from the state of Michigan, Flechter said that Lansing's program was one of the first in the nation to provide volume-based pricing: "If I put my newspaper in the trash, I pay to dispose of it. If I recycle it, not only am I doing something good for the environment, I'm saving money."

The more residents recycle, the more they save on their regular garbage disposal costs. The city's largest trash cart (95 gallons) costs \$15 per month, for example. But after sorting out metal, paper, cardboard and plastic for recycling, a family might be able to switch to the smallest possible container, which cost only \$10 per month, or even to blue bags, which cost \$8.75 for a pack of five, and are available at many local stores. Aside from the cost benefits, when residents recycle they're also following the law. The city waste disposal ordinance officially prohibits yard waste and recyclable materials from being mixed with trash.

Steve Goodwin, a solid waste operator for the city's Department of Waste Reduction Services, said most people aren't aware of how much they could save by recycling. On his daily route across Lansing, Goodwin sometimes randomly checks the garbage bins. "I guarantee that any owner of a large cart could get away with a smaller cart if they would recycle more. That's true for every resident in the city."

Goodwin is a UAW Local 2256 representative who represents five drivers whose jobs would be eliminated under the proposed new budget. 11 drivers would remain.

Lansing residents would most likely see the effects of reducing the driving staff during the winter months, he thinks, because that's when pick-ups take the longest. "There's going to be stuff sitting out," he said, "and we will have to work even more overtime than we already do."

While Goodwin criticizes the cutbacks, he's in favor of increasing recycling and compost fees, saying that this would reflect increased costs, and the program would still be less expensive than any other in the Greater Lansing area.

When asked about the city's rationale behind the new recycling budget, the deputy director for Lansing's Public Service Department, Bill Bergman, said that the city is trying to raise revenues and prevent the program from slipping further into the red.

Bergman said the recycling program lost \$530,000 last year and is expected to lose \$673,000 this year. To compensate, the proposed budget cuts would save an estimated \$350,000, and the rate increase would generate an additional \$300,000 in revenues.

Bergman said that eliminating the pickup service for yard waste would only be a small reduction in services, since the largest demand for composting was during the fall and the spring. Bergman said the recycling program would probably be able to compensate for the lost full-time staff jobs by hiring more seasonal employees. "They'll be able to move back and forth from composting to street maintenance activities," he said.

And the seven full-time employees wouldn't be laid off, he assured. The city would help them find positions in other departments.

Goodwin opposes hiring more seasonal employees. "I can tell you that the union will not stand for the idea of bringing new seasonal employees in, to do work you've just removed full-timers from. Seasonal workers are cheaper. You've just eliminated paying someone benefits."

Goodwin said he plans to speak up against the budget cuts, despite already facing internal pressure to keep quiet.

City Council has scheduled a series of public hearings in April and May, to discuss Lansing's \$109.6 million fiscal plan for 2004-'05. The Council will vote on the budget at 7 p.m., May 17.

Another member of the recycling Advisory Committee, Nancy Norton, plans to complain about the downsizing. "It's terrible. We need to have more people coordinating recycling in Lansing, not to cut back," she said. She said that she's particularly troubled about Lansing Mayor Tony Benavides' plan to remove the recycling coordinator, Steve Chalker, a man "very committed" to increasing the number of residents who recycle.

This would have never have happened under the administration of former Mayor David Hollister, Norton argued, saying that she suspects recycling is not as high on Benavides' list of priorities.

The travel agent suggested that if the city really wanted to reduce costs, they should eliminate their \$150,000 public relations contract with Kolt & Serkaian Communications. Benavides has proposed reducing it by 15 percent.

O'Brien, who is also a member of Mid-Michigan Environmental Action Council, questioned whether there was a hidden agenda behind the restructuring. She said that she suspects one or more City Council members may be on the side of private waste disposal firms and are trying to give them more business. The city already contracts with the Granger and Friedland companies.

O'Brien said that during her term on the recycling advisory committee, she suggested establishing drop-off sites to complement the pick-up program. This would allow the city to resell some of its recyclables, such as mulch, rather than having to pay for their disposal.

She said the city's recycling coordinator picked up on her idea and presented a "wonderful plan" to enhance the existing recycling program and partner with other area programs. But none of his ideas were ever set into action. O'Brien thinks this has to do with City Council's not supporting recycling. "I think Steve has hit the wall so many times that he's not even coming up with new ideas anymore, because he knows they're going to get shot down."

O'Brien said the Lansing recycling program was being made to bear the burden of the City Council's own mistake three years ago. Rather than moderately increasing the recycling fee to match inflation, in 2002 the Council reduced the fee from \$57.50 to \$52.50. "The City Council shot itself in the foot by reducing those fees. So they're not willing to go all the way and really fund the program as it stands, because of the bad decision they made."

One consequence of this "political posturing," O'Brien said, is that Lansing residents aren't informed about the benefits of a strong public recycling program. This lack of support on the part of City Council and the mayor's office has made it increasingly difficult to get more people involved.

When asked whether the city's proposed budget cuts were part of a broader plan to downsize or even privatize the recycling program, Bergman said the city has no such intentions. He said that he welcomes plans to make the recycling program more profitable, including plans to establish a drop-off site for grass clippings. "Those ideas have been brainstormed more than ever. They will continue to be discussed at meetings."

But Bergman said he is concerned that a drop-off site wouldn't be cost-efficient, although he doesn't yet have a concrete estimate on hand.

City Councilman Harold Leeman said he opposes cutting the recycling budget. "We're sending the wrong message. The younger generation is for recycling. If we want to have young people stay in Lansing, we need to offer those services."

Carol Wood has also expressed disapproval over the recycling budget cuts.

Norton said that she and other recycling activists will speak up at the upcoming meetings.

The recycling committee recently sent two letters to Benavides outlining ideas for a recycling expansion process as well as a program for general public education, recycling in schools and the creation of drop-off centers.

Their second letter, which was sent in January 2004, concluded: "With your guidance and the help of Lansing's exemplary recycling staff, the Advisory Committee can provide the input necessary to achieve the objectives

outlined."

Flechter has said that neither of the two letters has received any response from the mayor's office.

Care to respond? Send letters to letters@lansingcitypulse.com. View our Letters policy.

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